

SUMMARY

The United States decision to provide military assistance to France and the Associated States of Indochina was reached informally in February/March 1950, funded by the President on May 1, 1950, and was announced on May 8 of that year. The decision was taken in spite of the U.S. desire to avoid direct involvement in a colonial war, and in spite of a sensing that France's political-military situation in Indochina was bad and was deteriorating. Moreover, predictions that U.S. aid would achieve a marked difference in the course of the Indochina War were heavily qualified.

The situation in which the decision was made was completely dominated by the take-over of and consolidation of power in China by the communists. Nationalist Chinese forces had been withdrawn from mainland China and Communist Chinese troops had arrived on the border of Indochina in late 1949. This period was the high water mark of U.S. fears of direct Chinese Communist intervention in Indochina. NIE 5 of 29 December 1950 stated: "Direct intervention by Chinese Communist troops may occur at any time... it is almost certain to occur in strength whenever there is danger either that the Viet Minh will fail to maintain its military objective of driving the French out of Indochina, or that the Bao Dai Government is succeeding in undermining the support of the Viet Minh." *So help France, - ensure Chinese victory!*

The rationale of the decision was provided by the U.S. view that the Soviet-controlled expansion of communism both in Asia and in Europe required, in the interests of U.S. national security, a counter in Indochina. The domino thesis was quite prominent. On 6 March 1950, the Secretary of Defense wrote the President as follows: "The choice confronting the United States is to support the legal government in Indochina or to face the extension of communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and possibly westward..." Despite this statement, it was a generally accepted proposition that "regardless of current U.S. commitments for certain military assistance to China, the U.S. will not commit any of its armed forces to the defense of Indochina against overt, foreign aggression, under present circumstances."

The decision to begin military assistance to France and the Associated States of Indochina was not made under the illusion of great expectations. In April 1950, the Joint Chiefs would go no further than to say that prompt delivery of the aid would do no more than create the "possibility of success." In July 1950, General Erskine, after completing his Presidential mission to Indochina, reported that "the amount of aid and the scope of the assistance thus far requested by the French were inadequate to the needs of the situation." All U.S. expectations seemed to have been underpinned by the

Joint Chiefs' belief that "attainment of United States objectives in Asia can only be achieved by ultimate success in China." >

Results of the decision were mixed. Although implementation of the decision was partially successful in that it enabled the French to continue the military campaign in Indochina to the time of the Geneva Accords, military assistance was by and large a failure as an instrument of U.S. policy: the U.S. neither assured the French a military success, influenced the political situation to advantage, nor prevented the loss of North Vietnam to the communists at Geneva. Out, 300?

The U.S. MAAG Indochina was unable to perform even the limited functions assigned it. The French, never eager for U.S. advice, succeeded in limiting the function of MAAG to order-taking in the commercial sense.

Contributing to the initial U.S. decision to aid the French, and to limiting the effectiveness of the U.S. program of assistance, were (1) setting impracticable preconditions for assistance upon the French, (2) the U.S. proclivity to accept a slender chance of success without weighing alternatives, (3) the suppression of alternatives leading to decisional circularity and reinforcement of existing policies, (4) repeated failures of the U.S. to bargain effectively with the French, and (5) the vulnerability of the U.S. policy-making machinery to spoofing, particularly as regards U.S. credulity in accepting French information at face value and in being susceptible to "red" scares.

The decision to provide assistance to France and the Associated States is the focus of this discussion; it was but one issue among hundreds pre-occupying the United States Government in the time period under consideration -- the fall of China and the Korean War -- and it was probably not regarded by those who made policy as among their critical decisions. There is no evidence of any high U.S. official arguing that any significant commitment threshold was being crossed. There were, however, those who maintained that the important anti-colonial stand of the U.S. was being undermined. These voices (and they were basically from the public domain) were drowned out by those who advocated immediate security needs. The importance of the decision was that when the U.S. was faced with an unambiguous choice between a policy of anti-colonialism and a policy of anti-communism, it chose the latter. And, although the decision was not perceived as getting the U.S. more deeply "involved" in Indochina, it did mark a tangible first step in that direction.

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1. Introduction: The U.S. and the French Colonial War

Because the early phase (1946-1949) of the Indochina war was an overt attempt by the French to reassert authority and control over their Indochinese colonies, the United States, although aware that European Recovery Program (ERP) funds were indirectly used to finance the war, refused to support that war directly. However, American actions taken to assure a neutral position -- refusal to sell armaments to the French for use in Indochina; refusal to transport troops, arms, or ammunition "to or from Netherlands East Indies or French Indochina" 1/ -- accompanied by public and private statements of anti-colonialist sentiments, did constitute, at least in French eyes, a policy hostile to the French interest in Indochina. 2/ Therefore, early in 1947, the Department of State attempted to reassure the French Government, and to make U.S. policies and actions more palatable to them:

"...In spite any misunderstanding which might have arisen in minds French in regard to our position concerning Indochina they must appreciate that we have fully recognized France's sovereign position in that area and we do not wish to have it appear that we are in any way endeavoring undermine that position, and French should know it is our desire to be helpful and we stand ready assist any appropriate way we can to find solution for Indochinese problem. At same time we cannot shut our eyes to fact that there are two sides this problem and that our reports indicate both a lack French understanding of other side (more in Saigon than in Paris) and continued existence dangerously outmoded colonial outlook and methods in area...." 3/

Neither direct nor indirect assistance to the French effort in Indochina was deemed "appropriate," however, until the French took concrete steps to grant autonomy to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The U.S. was prepared to support the "Bao Dai solution" for Vietnam when and if Bao Dai acquired genuine independence. The U.S. warned France against settling for a "native government [headed by Bao Dai] which by failing to develop appeal among Vietnamese might become virtually [a] puppet government, separated from [the] people and existing only by [the] presence [of] French military forces." 4/

why?
CVN

In March, 1949, in the so-called Elysee Agreement, France contracted with Bao Dai to grant "independence within the French Union" to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. 5/ Despite U.S. urgings, the Elysee Agreement remained a potentially empty and ill-defined French promise for eleven months. In that period, the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek were driven from the China mainland, and in November, Mao's legions arrived at the Indochina border. In January, 1950, Ho Chi Minh declared that his was the "only legal government of the Vietnamese people" and indicated his willingness to cooperate with any nation willing to recognize it on the basis of "equality and mutual respect of national sovereignty and territory." 6/

The Communist Chinese promptly responded with recognition, followed by the Soviets. In France, there was a sharp debate in the National Assembly between Leftist advocates of an immediate truce with the Viet Minh, and Government supporters of ratification for the Elysee Agreement. On 2 February 1950, the French Government prevailed, and the Elysee Agreement was formally ratified. Under the circumstances, the United States determined that this action met its minimum requirements for tangible French progress towards Vietnamese autonomy. On 3 February, President Truman approved recognition of the States of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. 7/ Within three months the United States decided to extend economic and military aid to the new States. On 8 May 1950, the Secretary of State announced that:

"The United States Government, convinced that neither national independence nor democratic evolution exist in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism, considers the situation to be such as to warrant its according economic aid and military equipment to the Associated States of Indochina and to France in order to assist them in restoring stability and permitting these states to pursue their peaceful and democratic development." 8/

The U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war originated with its decision to provide assistance to France and the Associated States, and to form MAAG Indochina. Therefore, it is of particular importance to understand the reasons for the decision, the form of its execution, and its effects.

2. The Containment of Communism

U.S. chagrin and increasing concern over the post-World War II expansion of the Soviet Union in Europe, together with fear of further gains by communism, set the tone of U.S. policy toward Asian communist nations in the 1948-1950 period. As the Secretary of State's statement above indicates, these were the days of the "monolithic Communist bloc," dominated by the Soviet Union. A National Security Council policy paper of 1949 stated that:

"The USSR is now an Asiatic power of the first magnitude with expanding influence and interest extending throughout continental Asia and into the Pacific. Since the defeat of Japan...the Soviet Union has been able to consolidate its strategic position until the base of Soviet power in Asia comprises not only the Soviet Far East, but also China north of the Great Wall, Northern Korea, Sakhalin, and the Kuriles." 9/

The question of how best to oppose the expansion of communism in Asia was raised to crisis proportions by the "loss" of China. An extensive and acrimonious national debate on foreign policy was stirred, conducted in the midst of growing public apprehension over communist penetration, espionage, and subversion in Europe and within the United

advocated increased aid to the Chinese Nationalists, who were regarded by many, even at this late date, as the bulwark containing communism in Asia. 10/ Although no major emphasis was given Indochina in 1949, NSC papers did discuss the importance of the Franco-Viet Minh struggle, and link the future of Indochina with that of the rest of the world:

"In any event, colonial-nationalist conflict provides a fertile field for subversive communist activities, and it is now clear that Southeast Asia is the target of a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin. In seeking to gain control of Southeast Asia, the Kremlin is motivated in part by a desire to acquire Southeast Asia's resources and communication lines, and to deny them to us. But the political gains which would accrue to the USSR from communist capture of Southeast Asia are equally significant. The extension of communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us: if Southeast Asia also is swept by communism we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East and in a then critically exposed Australia." 11/

It was precisely the extension of communist authority over China referred to above that led to increased emphasis in U.S. policy on Indochina in late 1949 and 1950.

Following the Chinese Communist victories of 1949 and the movement of Chinese Communist troops to the border of Indochina in November of that year, NSC 64 (February 7, 1950) concluded that "the Departments of State and Defense should prepare, as a matter of priority, a program of all practicable measures designed to protect U.S. security interests in Indochina." 12/ On the same day, 13/ following the Communist Chinese (January 18) and the Soviet (January 30) recognition of the Ho Chi Minh regime, 14/ the United States announced its recognition of the Bao Dai Government. Theretofore, the U.S. had remained neutral, hesitating to choose between supporting France, a friendly colonial power engaged in re-establishing its authority, or supporting the Viet Minh, a communist-dominated independence movement in opposition to that European ally. This dilemma had been resolved by the victory of the Chinese Communists over the Nationalists, and by the threat posed to Indochina. The United States policy of support for the French and the Associated States was adjudged one befitting an anti-colonial democracy: support of nationalism and independence; opposition to attempted encroachments thereon by international communism.

3. "The Line of Containment" and "The Domino Theory"

The logic of this shift in U.S. policy is found not only in the direct threat to Southeast Asia posed by Communist China (and the Soviet Union), but also in the broader strategic concept of a line of containment, and in the early articulation of what later became known as the

"domino theory." Discussion of the line of containment centered about where that line was to be drawn: Indochina, and, later, Korea, fell on the free side of that line. 15/ The domino notion had been advanced by General Claire Chennault, among others, in the reference to Nationalist China 16/; the domino theory as applied to Indochina reinforced the decision of where to draw the line of containment. Both ideas were embodied by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a 1950 memorandum to the Secretary of Defense evaluating "the strategic importance, from the military point of view, of Southeast Asia":

"c. Southeast Asia is a vital segment in the line of containment of Communism stretching from Japan southward and around to the Indian Peninsula... The security of the three major non-Communist base areas in this quarter of the world -- Japan, India, and Australia -- depends in a large measure on the denial of Southeast Asia to the Communists. If Southeast Asia is lost, these three base areas will tend to be isolated from one another;

"d. The fall of Indochina would undoubtedly lead to the fall of the other mainland states of Southeast Asia...

"e. The fall of Southeast Asia would result in the virtually complete denial to the United States of the Pacific Littoral of Asia...

"f. ... Soviet control of all the major components of Asia's war potential might become a decisive factor affecting the balance of power between the United States and the USSR...

"g. A Soviet position of dominance over the Far East would also threaten the United States position in Japan... The feasibility of retention by the United States of its offshore island bases could thus be jeopardized." 17/

This theory, whether more or less completely articulated, appears in the relevant NSC papers of the Indochina War period, and underlies all major U.S. policy decisions taken relevant to the area. 18/

4. U.S. Perception of the Chinese Communist Threat

In the words of NSC 64 (February, 1950), "The presence of Chinese Communist troops along the border of Indochina makes it possible for arms, material and troops to move freely from Communist China to the northern Tonkin area now controlled by Ho Chi Minh. There is already evidence of movement of arms." 19/ NIE 5 maintained somewhat later, as the decision to help the French was being re-examined, that: "The Communist Chinese regime is already furnishing the Viet Minh materiel, training, and technical assistance. Official French sources report that Chinese Communist troops are already present in Tonkin in some strength... 20/ Direct intervention by Chinese Communist troops may occur at any time... It is almost certain

to occur in strength whenever there is danger either that the Viet Minh will fail to attain its military objective of driving the French out of Indochina, or that the Bao Dai Government is succeeding in undermining the support of the Viet Minh." 21/ NIE 5 appeared on December 29, 1950.

Although the threat of intervention to be expected from Communist China did not again reach this intensity or certainty during the remainder of the war -- the estimated probability of intervention declined consistently after the publication of NIE 5 -- estimates throughout the period indicate continuing Communist Chinese provision of military arms, materiel, and training to the Viet Minh, and the existence of Communist Chinese potential for direct intervention. No direct reference was made to possible Viet Minh resentment toward, or resistance to, direct Chinese intervention.

In sum, the U.S. perceived a major Chinese threat at the time the decision to support France and the Associated States was made; a high probability was assigned direct Chinese Communist intervention at the time this decision was being confirmed; this assigned probability declined rapidly, and it remained low through the post-Korean war period. It was believed that the Chinese were providing assistance to the Viet Minh throughout the period late 1949-1954.

5. U.S. Perceptions of the Situation within Vietnam

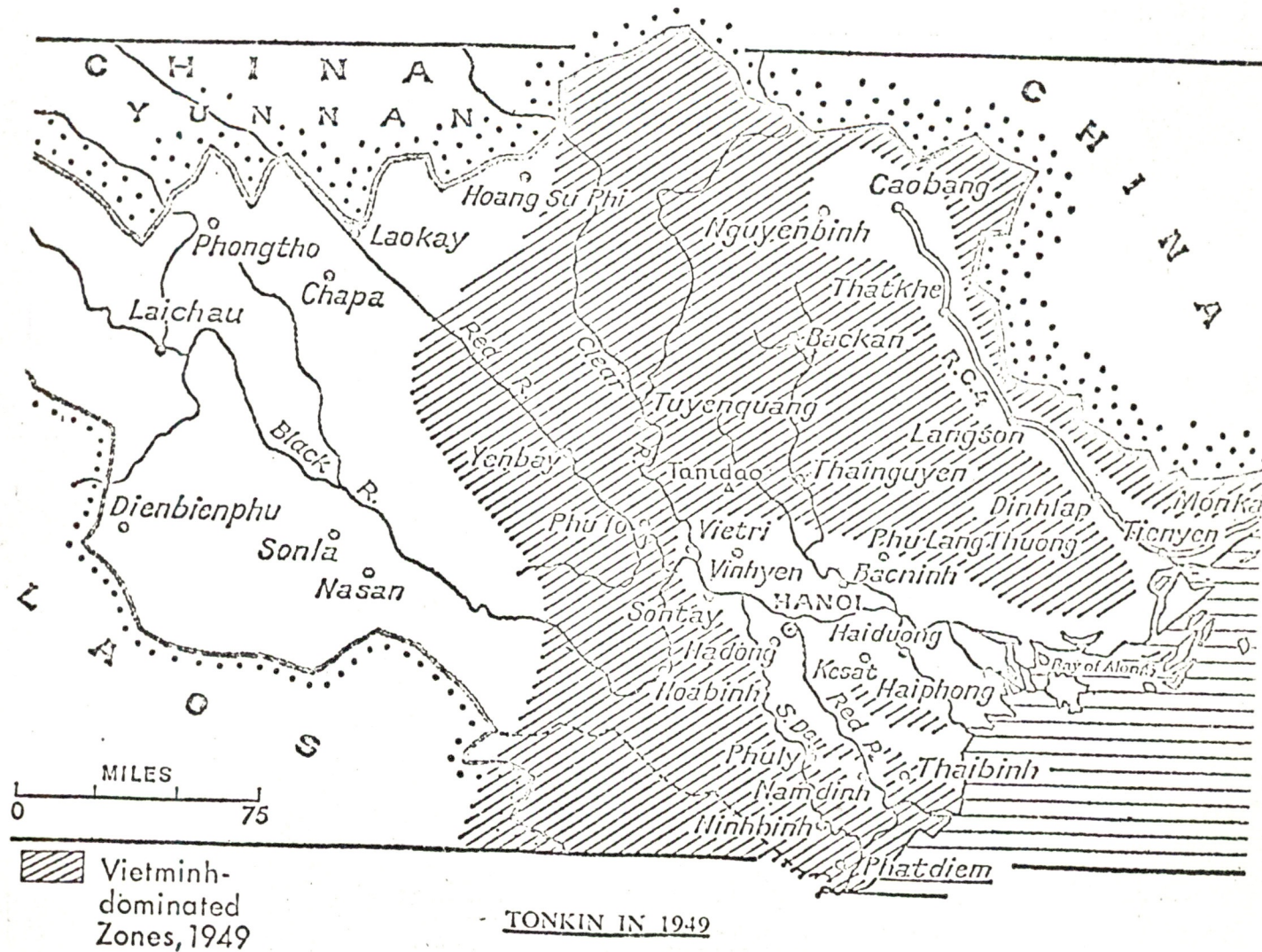
On April 5, 1950, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, referring to intelligence estimates, indicated to the Secretary of Defense their view that "the situation in Southeast Asia has deteriorated," and that, further, "without United States assistance, this deterioration will be accelerated." 22/ (The implication that U.S. assistance would result in improvement over and above the present situation cannot be detected in this carefully worded statement.) The Joint Chiefs of Staff went on to state that: "In general, the basic conditions of political and economic stability in this area, as well as the military and internal security conditions, are unsatisfactory. These factors are closely interrelated, and it is probable that, from the long-term point of view, political and economic stability is the controlling factor. On the other hand, the military situation in some areas, particularly Indochina, is of pressing urgency."

NIE 5 was the over-all U.S. assessment of the situation in Vietnam closest in time to the U.S. decision to support the French and the Associated States. It estimated the French position as "critically endangered by the Viet Minh," and as "precarious." 23/ Combining the more detailed estimates of this document with statements and estimates contained in other U.S. documents contemporary with NIE 5, the following picture emerges:

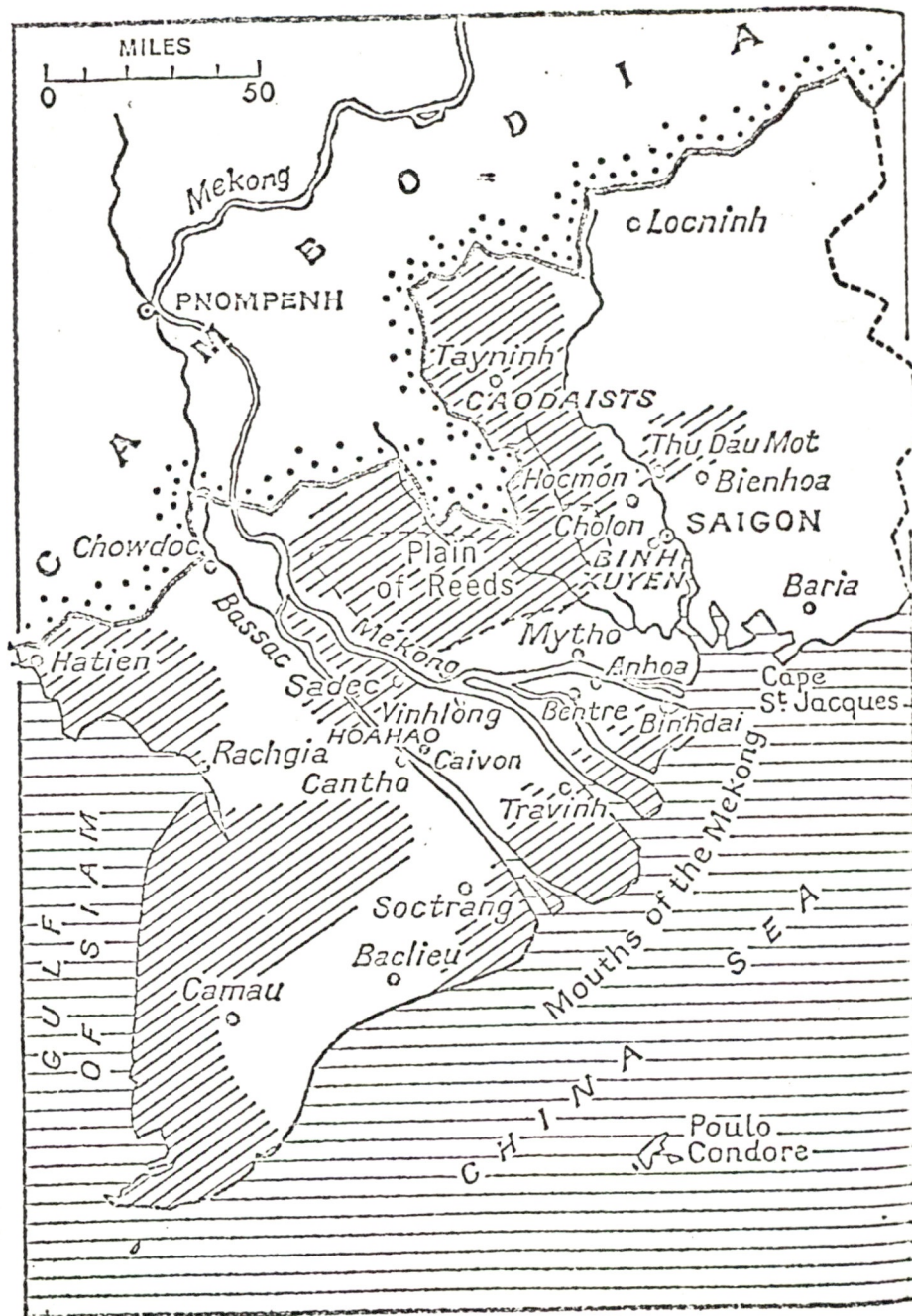
a. The Military Situation

(1) French-Viet Minh areas of control - see maps





Source: L. Bodard, The Quicksand War (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967), 22



COCHINCHINA IN 1949

 Vietminh-dominated Zones, 1949

Source: L. Bodard,
The Quicksand War
(Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
1967), 30.

DISSIDENT ACTIVITIES IN INDOCHINA

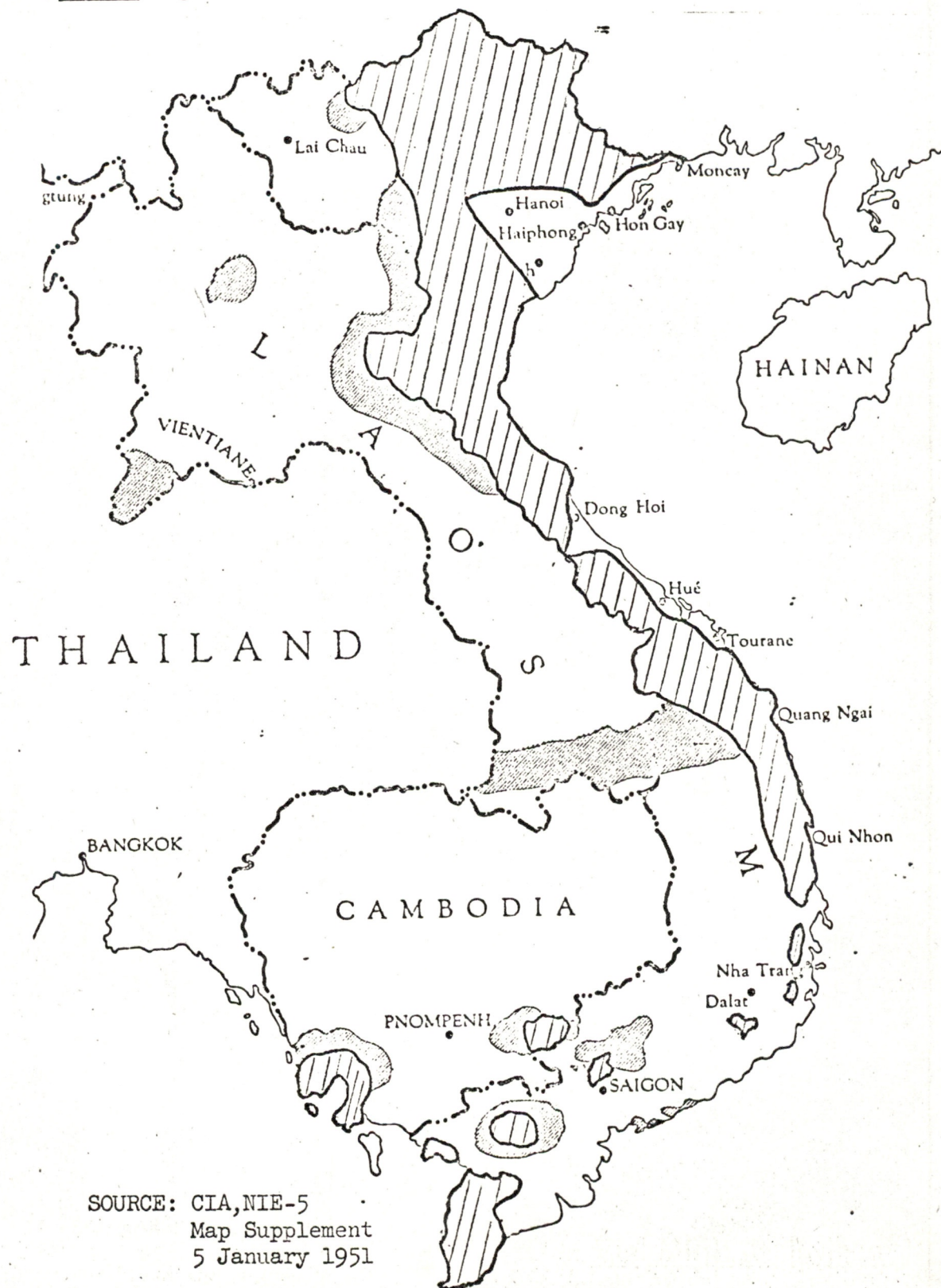
(3 November 1950)



Areas in which Communist-led rebels are challenging government authority.

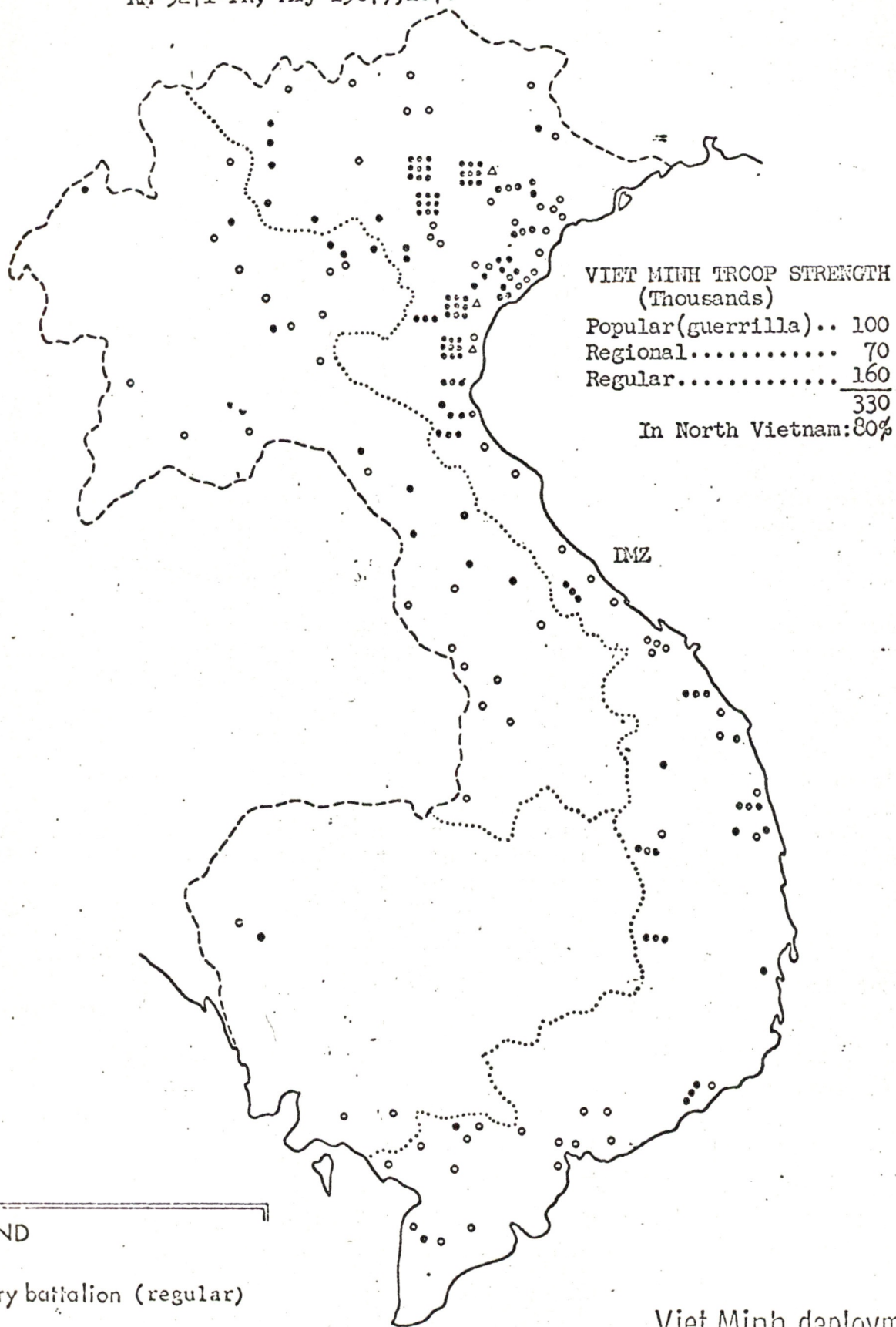


Areas in which Communist-instigated guerrilla attacks have recently occurred.



SOURCE: CIA, NIE-5
Map Supplement
5 January 1951

Source: V.J.Croizat, trans., A Translation from the French:
Lessons of the War in Indochina (Santa Monica: RAND Corp.,
 RM-5271-PR, May 1967), 107.



LEGEND

◦ Infantry battalion (regular)

○ Regional battalion

△ Artillery or antiaircraft or engineer battalion

Viet Minh deployment
September 30, 1953

- (2) Force ratio - French between 1.5 and 1.6 to 1 Viet Minh; vis-a-vis regular forces in the Tonkin Delta, the ratio was reversed - approximately 1.15 Viet Minh to 1 French (NIE 5).
- (3) Equipment status - French superiority, but Viet Minh improving due to Chinese aid.
- (4) Mobility - Viet Minh superior; French roadbound.
- (5) Strategy - French strategy lacking in aggressiveness, defensive, of doubtful value.
- (6) Status of Vietnamese National Army - essentially none; "only a slight chance that the French can maintain their military position long enough" 24/ to build such an army.
- (7) Relative capabilities - danger of a major military defeat of the French by the Viet Minh in Tonkin within six to nine months, which would jeopardize the French position in the remainder of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

b. The Economic and Political Situation

French resources badly strained; little or no real nationalist Vietnamese leadership, government; little popular support of Bao Dai regime 25/; political and economic situation generally poor.

c. French Objectives in Vietnam

French slowness and obstructionism over the years in creating a Vietnamese national government and national army (March 8, 1949, agreements were not ratified by France until February 2, 1950), and continued slowness in giving control of the bureaucracy to the Vietnamese, indicate a reluctant departure, if any departure, from colonial objectives.

d. French Resolve to Remain in Vietnam

"... there are grounds for questioning the French will to remain in Indochina." 26/

Thus, the American perception of the situation in Vietnam in 1950 was generally one of gloom, with little light at the end of the tunnel; in retrospect, it seems reasonably accurate.

6. The Decision to Assist France and the Associated States

a. French Request Aid

United States involvement in the bleak Indochinese situation was hastened when, on February 16, 1950, the French requested U.S. military

and economic assistance for the prosecution of the Indochinese war. The French forwarded their request after deciding "to set forth to the United States Government fully and frankly the extreme gravity of the situation in Indochina..."

"... the truth of the matter was that the effort in Indochina was such of a drain on France that a long-term program of assistance was necessary and it was only from the United States that it could come. Otherwise ... it was very likely that France might be forced to reconsider her entire policy with the possible view to cutting her losses and withdrawing from Indochina ... looking into the future it was obvious ... that France could not continue indefinitely to bear this burden alone if the expected developments in regard to increased assistance to Ho Chi Minh came about... In any event the French Government was confronted with necessity of reducing the present French forces in Indochina by at least 25,000 not only for budgetary reasons, but because additional men were urgently needed in connection with French national military program." 27/

Yet this appeal for aid, its thinly-veiled reinforcing arguments referring to withdrawal and the defense of Europe (on the day following the severing of U.S.-Bulgarian relations), was unaccompanied by a willingness to satisfy a U.S. request for France to announce the "evolutionary nature" of the governments of the Associated States, or to clarify otherwise the French intentions toward Indochina.

On February 27, a Department of State report on the position of the United States with respect to Indochina was submitted for the NSC's consideration. Issued on February 27 as NSC 64, the report concluded that:

"10. It is important to United States security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat.

"11. The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina were controlled by a Communist-dominated government. The balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard.

"12. Accordingly, the Departments of State and Defense should prepare as a matter of priority a program of all practicable measures designed to protect United States security interests in Indochina." 28/

To "facilitate" Department of Defense consideration of NSC 64, then Deputy Under Secretary of State Dean Rusk provided Major General James H. Burns of OSD a brief statement of Department of State policy in Indochina and Southeast Asia:

"The Department of State believes that within the limitations imposed by existing commitments and strategic priorities, the resources of the United States should be deployed to reserve Indochina and Southeast Asia from further Communist encroachment. The Department of State has accordingly already engaged all its political resources to the end that this object be secured. The Department is now engaged in the process of urgently examining what additional economic resources can effectively be engaged in the same operation.

"It is now, in the opinion of the Department, a matter of the greatest urgency that the Department of Defense assess the strategic aspects of the situation and consider, from the military point of view, how the United States can best contribute to the prevention of further Communist encroachment in that area." 29/

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In a memorandum for the President of March 6, 1950, the Secretary of Defense described U.S. options as follows:

"The French are irrevocably committed in Indochina and are supporting the three states as a move aimed at achieving non-Communist political stability... The choice confronting the United States is to support the legal governments in Indochina or to face the extension of Communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and possibly westward..." 30/

b. The Griffin Mission

While the choice among alternatives awaited provision of the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the military departments, 31/ the Secretary of State sent to the Far East "the Griffin Mission," which was given the task of surveying "the kinds and approximate value of assistance needed" 32/ in Indochina (among other countries). Departing when it did, some five months following the fall of Nationalist China, and headed by the former Deputy Chief of the Aid Mission to Mainland China, the Griffin Mission was probably intended to avoid further attacks on the State Department's Asia policy as well as to determine how U.S. economic resources might effectively be employed in Southeast Asia.

On March 22, the Griffin Mission report recommended U.S. aid for a program of rural rehabilitation, the provision of limited amounts of commodities and industrial equipment, and a program of technical assistance. These measures were estimated to cost \$23.5 million for the period through June, 1951. The mission also recommended the "psychological shock of ships with military aid material in the immediate future" 33/ as a measure to dramatize the U.S. commitment to those on the scene.

c. JCS Views

On April 5, the Joint Chiefs of Staff responded to a request by the Secretary of Defense with recommendations for measures which, from

the United States military point of view, might prevent communist expansion in Southeast Asia. 34/ The six most important points made by the Chiefs are these:

(1) A recommendation for early implementation of military aid programs for Indochina and the other states of Southeast Asia, with funds already allocated to the states of Southeast Asia, to be delivered at the earliest practicable date and to be augmented as a matter of urgency with funds from the unallocated portion of the President's emergency fund. For the next fiscal year, an estimated \$100 million will be required for the military portion of this program.

(2) "In view of the history of military aid in China, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urge that these aid programs be subject, in any event, to the following conditions:

"a. That United States military aid not be granted unconditionally; rather that it be carefully controlled and that the aid program be integrated with political and economic programs; and

"b. That requests for military equipment be screened first by an officer designated by the Department of Defense and on duty in the recipient state. These requests should be subject to his determination as to the feasibility and satisfactory coordination of specific military operations. It should be understood that military aid will only be considered in connection with such coordinated operational plans as are approved by the representative of the Department of Defense on duty in the recipient country. Further, in conformity with current procedures, the final approval of all programs for military materiel will be subject to the concurrence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

(3) "Formation of a Southeast Asia Aid Committee is recommended.

see 1960-61
(4) "The Joint Chiefs of Staff recognize the political implications involved in military aid to Indochina. It must be appreciated, however, that French armed forces ... are in the field and that if these were to be withdrawn this year because of political considerations, the Bao Dai regime probably could not survive even with United States aid. If the United States were now to insist upon independence for Vietnam and a phased French withdrawal from that country, this might improve the political situation. The French could be expected to interpose objections to, and certainly delays in such a program. Conditions in Indochina, however, are unstable and the situation is apparently deteriorating rapidly so that the urgent need for at least an initial increment of military and economic aid is psychologically overriding. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, therefore, recommend the provision of military aid to Indochina at the earliest practicable date under a program to implement the President's action approving the allocation of \$15 million for Indochina and that corresponding increments of political and economic aid be programmed on an interim basis without prejudice to the pattern of the policy for additional military, political and economic aid that may be developed later."

(5) "... the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend the immediate establishment of a small United States military aid group in Indochina... The Joint Chiefs of Staff would expect the senior member of this group to sit in consultation with military representatives of France and Vietnam and possibly of Laos and Cambodia. In addition to screening requests for materiel, he would be expected to insure full coordination of military plans and efforts between the French and Vietnamese forces and to supervise the allocation of materiel."

(6) "The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe in the possibility of success of a prompt coordinated United States program of military, political, and economic aid to Southeast Asia and feel that such a success might well lead to the gaining of the initiative in the struggle in that general area."

The last of these points is clearly fundamental to the undertaking of any program of assistance; yet in the Chiefs' memorandum it appears only as the concluding portion of the paragraph (paragraph 15) recommending establishment of a military aid group in Indochina, and is subsequently subjected to the qualification that "attainment of United States objectives in Asia can only be achieved by ultimate success in China."

More remarkable, however, is the rarity with which even such equivocal predictions of success appear in the available documents relating directly to the decision to provide assistance to Indochina. Direct statements on the probable effectiveness of such United States programs of the period are typically absent; indirect statements are typically of the implied-imperative ("we must do X if Asia is to be saved"), or the negative-imperative (if we do not do X, Asia will be lost"). There was no assurance of military success given; and the calculus of the decision-making process relating to the weighing of the probability of success against the costs of failure of U.S. programs in the 1950 period is not evident, unfortunately, in available documents.

and records

d. Presidential Approval

On May 1, 1950, President Truman approved the allocation of \$10 million to the Department of Defense to cover the early shipment of urgently needed military assistance items to Indochina, 35/ thus taking the first crucial decision regarding U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. On May 8, the Secretary of State, in a statement at the ministerial level meeting in Paris, announced United States assistance to the Associated States and France. And on May 24, the governments of France and the Associated States were notified of the United States intention to establish an economic aid mission to the Associated States, thus marking the implementation of the recommendations of the Griffin Mission. •

On June 27, 1950, President Truman, in announcing the onset of the Korean war, also stated that he had "directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indochina and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close

working relations with those forces." 36/ The concept of a military assistance advisory group had also been approved, although the President did not refer to MAAG in his public statement. 37/ Also, in June, following the recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Southeast Asia Aid Policy Committee was established.

e. Erskine Mission

The military mission dispatched by the President and headed by Major General Graves B. Erskine, USMC, arrived in Saigon on July 15, and reported its findings on August 5. General Erskine reported that a permanent solution of the Indochina crisis went beyond military action alone, the core of the problem being a deep-seated hatred and distrust of the French by the population that precluded their cooperation in the prosecution of the war. The mission also reported that the amount of aid and the scope of the assistance thus far requested by the French were inadequate to the needs of the situation. 38/

The first elements of the U.S. MAAG were assigned to Indochina on August 3, 1950; Brigadier General Francis G. Brink, USA, assumed command as the first Chief of MAAG on October 10. The mission of the MAAG was limited to provision of material assistance to the French forces and indirect provision of military aid to the forces of the Associated States; General Brink was directed not to assume any training or advisory responsibilities toward the indigenous armies. But from the outset, the French rigorously limited end-use inspections of MAAG to a small number of carefully prescribed visits. 39/

f. JCS Reevaluation

After the initial decision to provide assistance to France and the Associated States had been taken, the formation of an economic mission had been announced, the first shipment of arms and equipment had arrived in Indochina, and the MAAG had been approved and was in the process of formation, concern mounted over the soundness of these moves. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were again asked by the Secretary of Defense to formulate a position on future U.S. actions with respect to Indochina, and the Southeast Asia Aid Policy Committee (SEAAPC) published, on October 11, 1950, a draft "Proposed Statement of U.S. Policy on Indochina." The SEAAPC statement proposed adding another dimension to U.S. assistance policy: "Regardless of current U.S. commitments for provision of certain military assistance to Indochina, the U.S. will not commit any of its armed forces to the defense of Indochina against overt, foreign aggression, under present circumstances." 40/ The paper also recommended that the U.S. support the "prompt acceleration of the formation of new national armies of the three Associated States," and a covering memorandum to the Secretaries of State and Defense recommended that if negotiations were conducted with the French, U.S. representatives should:

"... secure French acceptance of the following conditions, which shall attach to the extension of U.S. assistance in the

formation of national armies in Indochina: (1) French Union Forces would not be withdrawn from Indochina until such Associated States armies are fully trained and ready to act effectively in replacement; (2) France would not decrease its outlays for Indochina below the 1950 rate during the period of the American military aid requested; (3) the national armies project would have the approval of the three Associated States governments; (4) the High Commissioner for Indochina, the French Command, and the three Associated States would maintain full consultative relations with the Legation and MAAG during the period of the formation of the armies."

The Joint Chiefs of Staff reevaluation appeared on October 27: military aid should be continued on an expedited basis. Again the judgment was offered that genuine autonomy and self-government had to be extended to the people of Indochina to ameliorate the basic cause of the deterioration of security in Indochina: lack of popular support for the authorities. 41/ But the most clearly articulated and complete expression of the Joint Chiefs' over-all position at year end is found in NSC 64/1, 42/ a November 28 paper by the Chiefs which takes account of a report from General Brink 43/ and the Southeast Asia Aid Policy Committee's draft of October 11; in fact, this statement of short- and long-run objectives contained in NSC 64/1 was to remain the basis of United States policy toward Indochina for the duration of the French-Indochina war.

"SHORT TERM OBJECTIVES

"a. The United States should take action, as a matter of urgency, by all means practicable short of the actual employment of United States military forces, to deny Indochina to Communism.

"b. As long as the present situation exists, the United States should continue to insure that the primary responsibility for the restoration of peace and security in Indochina rests with the French. - C V W

"c. The United States should seek to develop its military assistance program for Indochina based on an over-all military plan prepared by the French, concurred in by the Associated States of Indochina, and acceptable to the United States.

"(1) Both the plan and the program should be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency. It should be clearly understood, however, that United States acceptance of the plan is limited to the logistical support which the United States may agree to furnish. The aid provided under the program should be furnished to the French in Indochina and to the Associated States. The allocation of United States military assistance as between the French and the national armies of Indochina should be approved by the French and United States authorities in Indochina.

"(2) Popular support of the Government by the Indochinese people is essential to a favorable settlement of the security problem of Indochina. Therefore, as a condition to the provision of those further increases in military assistance to Indochina necessary for the implementation of an agreed over-all military plan, the United States Government should obtain assurances from the French Government that:

"(a) A program providing for the eventual self-government of Indochina either within or outside of the French Union will be developed, made public, and implementation initiated at once in order to strengthen the national spirit of the Indochinese in opposition to Communism.

"(b) National armies of the Associated States of Indochina will be organized as a matter of urgency. While it is doubtful that the buildup of these armies can be accomplished in time to contribute significantly to the present military situation, the direct political and psychological benefits to be derived from this course would be great and would thus result in immediate, although indirect, military benefits.

"(c) Pending the formation and training of Indochinese national armies as effective units, and as an interim emergency measure, France will dispatch sufficient additional armed forces to Indochina to insure that the restoration of peace and internal security in that country will be accomplished in accordance with the timetable of the over-all military plan for Indochina.

"(d) France will change its political and military concepts in Indochina to:

i. Eliminate its policy of
'colonialism.'

ii. Provide proper tutelage to
the Associated States.

iii. Insure that a suitable military command structure, unhampered by political interference, is established to conduct effective and appropriate military operations...

"(3) At an appropriate time the United States should institute checks to satisfy itself that the conditions set forth in subparagraph c.(2) above are being fulfilled.

d. The United States should exert all practicable political and diplomatic measures required to obtain the

recognition of the Associated States by the other non-Communist states of Southeast and South Asia.

"e. In the event of overt attack by organized Chinese Communist forces against Indochina, the United States should not permit itself to become engaged in a general war with Communist China but should, in concert with the United Kingdom, support France and the Associated States by all means short of the actual employment of United States military forces. This support should include appropriate expansion of the present military assistance program and endeavors to induce States in the neighborhood of Indochina to commit armed forces to resist the aggression.

"f. The United States should immediately reconsider its policy toward Indochina whenever it appears that the French Government may abandon its military position in that country or plans to refer the problem of Indochina to the United Nations. Unless the situation throughout the world generally, and Indochina specifically, changes materially, the United States should seek to dissuade the French from referring the Indochina question to the United Nations.

"g. Inasmuch as the United States-sponsored resolution, 'Uniting for Peace,' has been adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and should a situation develop in Indochina in a manner similar to that in Korea in which United Nations forces were required, the United States would then probably be morally obligated to contribute its armed forces designated for service on behalf of the United Nations. It is, therefore, in the interests of the United States to take such action in Indochina as would forestall the need for the General Assembly to invoke the provisions of the resolution, 'Uniting for Peace.' ..."

The JCS also proposed long-term objectives, urging the development of an underground guerrilla warfare capability, a psychological warfare program ("to demonstrate the evils of Communism....and to warn...of renewed Chinese imperialism"), and encouragement of an appropriate regional security arrangement. These concepts formed the heart of an NSC Staff Study of December 28. 44/ The initial decision to give assistance was confirmed after nearly one year's continual re-examination, and remained basic to U.S. policy for the remainder of the war.

7. MAP for Indochina

a. Magnitude

The U.S. military assistance program to the French and Associated States was implemented rapidly, considering the major U.S.

commitment to the Korean war. In a somewhat premature judgment of outcomes, a progress report on the implementation of NSC 64 (March 15, 1951) stated that "American military aid furnished the States' forces and the Army of the French Union may have been the decisive factor in the preservation of the area against Communist aggression." ^{45/} Through 1952 and into 1954 the MDAP shipments to Indochina increased steadily ^{46/}: by February 3, 1953, the United States had shipped 137,200 long tons of material (224 ships' cargoes); by July 1954, approximately 150,000 long tons had been sent, including 1,800 combat vehicles, 30,887 motor transport vehicles, 361,522 small arms and machine guns, 438 naval craft, 2 World War II aircraft carriers, and about 500 aircraft. By the conclusion of the Geneva agreements in July, 1954, the U.S. had delivered aid to Indochina at an original cost of \$2,600 million. ^{47/} Nonetheless, protests of the French at the slowness of deliveries and the "interference" of MAAG with French requests were recurrent, and peaked, during the crisis days of 1954. Yet these complaints probably reflected less genuine U.S. shortcomings than French resentment of American efforts to advise, screen, inspect, and verify, and sheer frustration. Moreover, the vagaries of the French logistic system not only made the MAAG job more difficult, but further impeded combat supplies.

b. Effectiveness

In spite of the conditions under which U.S. assistance to France and the Associated States was given, the MAAG during the period of the Indochina war was little more than a small (70 in 1950, ³⁴² in 1954) supply-support group which exerted far more influence upon U.S. decisions than on the French. The French, never eager for American advice, not only succeeded in limiting the function of MAAG to order-taking in the commercial sense, but in fact -- through adroit pressuring of officials above the MAAG -- sometimes reduced MAAG to the position of taking their military orders. Available data do not permit detailed evaluation of the efficiency of MAP, but it seems clear that French restrictions on the U.S. MAAG reduced it to virtual impotence. ^{48/}

However, to relate any judgment of the effectiveness of the United States assistance program simply and directly to the outcome of the war would clearly be inappropriate. For the most part, U.S. expectations were not high. In the words of the American Ambassador to France in February, 1950, "obviously any program of external assistance was marginal in character and entirely dependent for its success upon the solidity of the base -- in this case, the firmness of French policy and actions in Indochina." ^{49/} French determination to resist American advice was not matched by firmness in proceeding with granting independence to Vietnam, or otherwise meeting the political situation in Indochina. Hence, as the U.S. apparently expected, a favorable outcome to the Indochina war continued to elude France, even with American material and financial help. U.S. assistance enabled France to wage a military battle while it lost its political war -- in Saigon and in Paris. (The military defeat at Dien Bien Phu was important primarily from the point of view of its psychological and political impact on the French, and was so interpreted in the relevant U.S. intelligence estimates.) ^{50/}

If it would be an error to evaluate the effectiveness of the U.S. program in terms of war outcome, and if the efficiency of MAP and MAAG cannot meaningfully be analyzed, it remains to evaluate the degree to which France met the conditions under which assistance was tendered, which presumably impinged directly on U.S. political objectives:

- (1) The United States objective of insuring "that the primary responsibility for the restoration of peace and security in Indochina rests with the French" was fulfilled; in fact, it was insisted on by the French. On the one hand, U.S. military forces were never directly engaged in the Indochina war. On the other hand, the French, in retaining this primary responsibility, preserved the prerogative to determine policy and the freedom to reject U.S. advice. U.S. "leverage" was minimal.
- (2) The condition of basing the assistance program on "an urgently prepared French plan acceptable to the Associated States and to the U.S." was frustrated in several ways. At the outset no overall plan was presented, and those portions of existing plans to which U.S. authorities were privy (e.g., ⁷ Allessandri's pacification plan for the Tonkin Delta) were not acceptable to U.S. thinking. Second, when the Letourneau-Allard and Navarre plans were finally prepared (in 1953, three years after the U.S. decided that a plan was a necessary precondition for aid), some U.S. observers realized that these were more concepts than plans. U.S. acceptance of the plans was more reluctant than the granting of \$385 million in additional assistance might indicate. 51/ Finally, the plans, once "accepted," were not vigorously carried out. 52/
- (3) The French met pro forma the condition that they provide the U.S. assurances that they would grant self-government for Indochina, and form national armies for the Associated States. But it was clear throughout the war that, regardless of the amounts of U.S. assistance rendered, France's declarations of intent were grudgingly issued, and were seldom followed by action. The French Indochina war had to be lost before Vietnam was granted genuine independence.
- (4) Although France did expand its forces in Indochina, these forces were never sufficient to the task. French draftees were never employed in Indochina. France

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continually pointed to its European defense posture in explanation. In at least one case, U.S. personnel were requested (e.g., as aircraft mechanics), and 200 were provided, when a pool of suitable personnel existed in Metropolitan France.

- (5) Statements to the contrary notwithstanding, the French did not ameliorate neo-mercantilism or other colonial policies, or provide "proper tutelage" to the Associated States; nor did it develop a command structure suitable to the United States.
- (6) The U.S. "checks to satisfy itself that the conditions" imposed were being satisfied, were, by and large, few and far between, and were conducted at the pleasure and within the specifications of the French.
- (7) The French chose not to refer Indochina to the United Nations. Certainly the U.S. assistance program bore on this decision; whether or not it was the deciding factor is unclear.

The effectiveness of the United States assistance program as an instrument of United States policy -- quite aside from the outcome of the war -- was thus quite low.

8. Critique

As earlier sections of this paper have suggested, the U.S. was persuaded to involve itself in the Indochina war by the perceived need, following the fall of Nationalist China, to hold a line against communists. This strategic drawing of the line at the Chinese-Indochina border was reinforced by the belief that the fall of Indochina would undoubtedly lead to the fall of the other mainland states of Southeast Asia, and that the fall of Southeast Asia would eventuate in the virtually complete denial to the United States of the Pacific Littoral of Asia. Prospects for a French victory in Indochina were assessed in contemporary U.S. intelligence documents as poor; nonetheless, the U.S. provided military and economic assistance to the French and the Associated States in the belief that a prompt, coordinated United States program of military, political, and economic aid offered some prospect that France might succeed in gaining the initiative in the struggle in that area. Six major points of critique of U.S. policy follow:

a. The U.S. Misestimated France

U.S. policymakers apparently realized that the conditions they imposed upon the French were impracticable to some degree. Nonetheless, they believed that pre-conditions were necessary and could assist

in convincing the French to mend their colonial ways and to pursue the war with American methods, diligence, and aggressiveness. The French, long noted for proficiency and precision in logic, required no Descartes to realize that the United States was thus asking France (1) to regain full responsibility for the Indochina War, and in particular for fighting and taking casualties in that war; (2) to follow the "guidance" and "advice" of the United States on the exercise of this French responsibility; and (3) having fought the war, presumably to a successful conclusion, to relinquish control over Indochina. In view of the French willingness to retain responsibility for the war, it is not surprising that they were reluctant, at best, to accept propositions (2) and (3). Despite French pronouncements on their role in fighting communism, there is little reason to believe that they regarded the Indochina war in the same light as the U.S. viewed the Korean War. Rather, their behavior resembled that of other colonial powers who had fought to retain profitable colonies.

b. Slim Chance Accepted by the U.S.

Had U.S. policymakers recognized the slimness of the chance of persuading France to accept the three propositions specified above, they might have sought alternative courses of action in Indochina. As it was, the possibility (as opposed to the probability) of success was their prime consideration, and, overestimating U.S. leverage for influencing a favorable outcome, alternatives were not considered.

c. Circular U.S. Policy

Suppression of alternatives, both on the general and the particular level (see Note 48 for an example of the latter), led to a circularity in and reinforcement of existing policies -- constant forced choices between "bad" and "worse." 53/

d. Poor Bargaining

Having taken a hard policy line toward the French, the United States failed to bargain effectively. Thus, in circumstances not totally dissimilar from those prevailing in Vietnam in subsequent time periods, the U.S. continued to provide assistance disregarding infractions of pre-conditions; moreover, the pre-conditions for aid were not modified. Without modification, the conditions became worse than meaningless: standing testaments to U.S. impotence, to be recognized only when and how the French chose. The U.S. became virtually a prisoner of its own policy. Containment of communism, concern for the French in relation to the postwar Europe of NATO, EDC, and the Soviet threat in the West, combined with a fear, based on World War II strategy, that a French withdrawal from Indochina would leave exposed the U.S. flank in Korea, all compelled the U.S. to continue aid. Yet none of these considerations should have precluded modification of the U.S. bargaining strategy.

e. Misinformation

The U.S. policymaking machinery was highly vulnerable to spoofing, on at least three counts: (1) the very strength of the U.S.

position regarding communism must have been a constant temptation, not always resisted, for other parties to cry "red" and thus to manipulate the U.S.; (2) dependence on official French sources for intelligence and other information was potentially misleading; (3) reliance on the high-level mission technique for gathering information to be used as a direct input to policy decisions proved unsatisfactory. 54/

f. Costs Not Weighed

Finally, there is little indication that U.S. policymakers, their thoughts dominated by the objective of containing the monolithic communist bloc, faced up to the costs of winning the Indochina war, even while direct U.S. intervention was being considered. 55/ Nor does the evidence suggest that consideration was given to the tangible and intangible costs of providing U.S. military assistance to a power losing a war, including the potential impact on the U.S. position in Asia. And, finally, available documents fail to reveal any consideration given to the notion of sunk costs. There were, of course, voices in the wilderness. An unsigned, undated memorandum posed eight key questions to be answered by the NSC during the spring of 1954. 56/ Comment on the following four questions, in relation to the time at which they were raised, is unnecessary:

- Just how important is Southeast Asia to the security interests of the U.S.? Is the analysis in NSC 5405 still valid? Is the area important enough to fight for?
- How important is Indochina in the defense of Southeast Asia? Is the "domino theory" valid? Is Indochina important enough to fight for? If not, what are the strategic consequences of the loss of all or part of Indochina?
- If the U.S. intervenes in Indochina, can we count on the support of the natives? Can we fight as allies of the French and avoid the stigma of colonialism?
- Is there a strategic concept for the conduct of a war in Indochina which offers promise of early success...?

The decision of the United States to provide assistance to France and the Associated States during the Indochina War is usually treated lightly, if at all, in current histories. Yet, both the taking of the decision and its implementation were significant for and remarkably similar to subsequent U.S. experiences in Vietnam.